

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 EURE-00 PM-07 NSC-07 SP-03 SS-20 RSC-01

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FM AMEMBASSY ROME

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4512

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 ROME 5782

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT IT

SUBJECT: CONFIRMATION OF MALAGODI-BIGNARDI LEADERSHIP AT LIBERAL
PARTY CONGRESS

REF: ROME 1081

1. BEGIN SUMMARY: LIBERAL PARTY 14TH CONGRESS CONFIRMED BOTH MALAGODI-BIGNARDI LEADERSHIP AND WORST FEARS OF PARTY DISSIDENTS THAT MAJORITY FACTION INTENDS TO CONTINUE PREVIOUS CONTRIST POLICIES, HANGING ON TO LEVERS OF POWER WITH FEW CONCESSIONS TO GROWING BODY OF CRITICS WITHIN PARTY. SMALLER LEFT WING FACTION, "PRESENZA LIBERALE," WAS EXCLUDED FROM PARTY DIRECTORATE IN FAVOR OF PARTY RIGHT, AS A RESULT OF MASS DEFECTIONS RIGHTWARD FROM MAJORITY IN SECRET VOTE ON CANDIDATE LISTS. DESPITE INITIAL THREATS BY "PRESENZA LIBERALE" GROUP OF WITHDRAWAL FROM PARTY, BEST ESTIMATE IS THAT NO MAJOR SPLIT LIKELY AT THIS TIME ALTHOUGH INDIVIDUAL WITHDRAWALS MAY OCCUR. DISSIDENT CRITICISM FOCUSED ON LACK OF DYNAMISM BY MALAGODI-BIGNARDI LEADERSHIP, AND ON SUGGESTION THAT PLI SEEK VOTES FURTHER TO LEFT IN COMPETITION/COLLABORATION WITH REPUBLICANS, SOCIAL DEMOCRATS AND SOCIALISTS. MAJORITY MAY SEEK TO INJECT GREATER VITALITY INTO PARTY ORGANIZATION, BUT ALSO MORE BITE INTO PLI OPPOSITION TO CENTER-LEFT. EFFORT OF SOME SORT IS ESSENTIAL IF PARTY IS TO AVOID THREAT OF ELECTORAL ECLIPSE.
END SUMMARY

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2. LIBERAL PARTY 14TH CONGRESS WAS HELD IN ROME APR 18-23, ALMOST

A YEAR EARLIER THAN REQUIRED BY STATUTE, TO THRASH OUT PARTY POLICY AND ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS IN THE FACE OF A STEADY ELECTORAL DECLINE. PARTY LEFT FACTIONS, "RINNOVAMENTO" (ZANONI, ALTISSIMO, VALITUTTI) AND "PRESENZA LIBERALE" (BONEA), SUPPORTED BY PROMINENT DISSIDENTS WITHIN "LIBERTA NUOVA" MAJORITY FACTION INCLUDING PARLIAMENTARY DEPUTIES COTTONE, PAPA, GEROLIMETTO AND BOZZI, PROVOKED EARLY CONGRESS CALL BY CONCERTED ATTACK ON BIGNARDI-MALAGODI LEADERSHIP. OPPOSITION HELD LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBLE FOR PLI'S DECLINING ELECTORAL FORTUNES WHICH HAVE SEEN LIBERALS DROP FROM 1963 HIGHPOINT OF 7 PERCENT (REFLECTING ANTI-CENTER-LEFT PROTEST VOTE) TO 3.9 PERCENT IN THE 1972 POLITICAL ELECTIONS AND LESS THAN 2 PERCENT IN LAST NOV'S LIMITED AND OFF CYCLE LOCAL ELECTORAL TESTS. HOWEVER, DESPITE OPPOSITION HOPES THAT AT LEAST BIGNARDI COULD BE FORCED OUT AT CONGRESS, JAN 18-20 PLI NATIONAL COUNCIL MEETING RESULTS (REFTTEL) INDICATED ODDS HEAVILY AGAINST THEM. MAJORITY FACTION LEADERS WENT INTO CONGRESS CONFIDENT OF VICTORY, AND ONE OF PARTY VICE PRESIDENTS GAVE EMBOFF HIGHLY ACCURATE PREDICTION OF FINAL VOTE RESULTS (ON MOTIONS) DAY BEFORE CONGRESS OPENED.

3. MAJORITY FACTION TOOK TOUGH LINE IN CONGRESS DEBATE, CONCEDED LITTLE TO LEFT OPPOSITION AND REJECTING RIGHT WING POLICY PROPOSALS SEEKING ESTABLISHMENT OF A PRESIDENTIAL REPUBLIC AS A CURE TO THE COUNTRY'S ILLS. OPENING SPEECH BY SECGEN BIGNARDI EMPHASIZED MAJORITY INTENTION TO FOLLOW A CLEARCUT "CENTER" LINE TOTALLY REJECTING BOTH FAR RIGHT AND MARXIST EXTREMES. HE CALLED FOR A HARD LINE OPPOSITION TO THE CENTER-LEFT AND WARNED OF THE DANGER OF ANY CHRISTIAN DEMOCRAT (DC)-COMMUNIST "HISTORIC COMPROMISE." GREATER ORGANIZATIONAL VIGOR WAS PROMISED, BUT BIGNARDI, AND LATER MALAGODI, MADE CLEAR THAT POLICY AND ORGANIZATION GO HAND IN HAND AND THAT THE MAJORITY INTENDS TO MAINTAIN THEIR GRIP ON THE LEVERS OF POWER IN FULL PROPORTION TO THEIR DELEGATE STRENGTH. CALLS BY THE LEFT FACTIONS FOR PLI COOPERATION WITH OTHER LAY DEMOCRATIC PARTIES INCLUDING THE SOCIALISTS (PSI), WITH THE AIM OF FORMING A "THIRD FORCE" TO COUNTERBALANCE THE DC AND PCI MET WITH A RENEWED BUT TEPID OFFER BY BIGNARDI FOR LOCAL LEVEL COOPERATION WITH THE SOCIAL DOMOCRATS (PSDI) AND REPUBLICANS (PRI) IN THE IMPORTANT 1975 REGIONAL ELECTIONS.

4. IN THE FOREIGN POLICY FIELD, BIGNARDI AND OTHER MAJORITY
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SPEAKERS, INCLUDING BROSIO, WERE PREDICTABLY FOUR SQUARE FOR CLOSE ATLANTIC TIES AND EUROPEAN UNITY. PARTY RIGHT ECHOED THESE SENTIMENTS, BUT BONEA, WHOSE SMALL (11PERCENT) "PRESENZA LIBERALE" FACTION IS ON THE LEFT MARGIN OF THE PLI SPECTRUM, WAS STRONGLY CRITICAL OF US POLICIES TOWARDS EUROPE AND QUOTED WITH APPROVAL A FRENCH COMMENTATOR'S HARSH CRITIQUE OF US "FAILURE TO CONSULT" WITH EUROPEAN ALLIES AT THE TIME OF THE MIDEAST CRISIS ALERT.

5. AS THE CONGRESS DREW TO A CLOSE, THE OPPOSITION FACED THE FACT THAT A CONTINUED UNITED FRONT AGAINST THE MAJORITY HAD NO CHANCE OF A BALLOT VICTORY AGAINST BIGNARDI. THE TWO LEFT FACTIONS CONSEQUENTLY SUBMITTED SEPARATE MOTIONS, AND MOST OF THE PAPA-BOZZI-COTTONE-GEROLIMETTO DELS ABSTAINED FROM THE VOTE. TWO SMALL RIGHT FACTIONS, "ITALIAN LIBERALE" (MONACO) AND "INCONTRO DEMOCRATICO" (SOGNO), JOINED FORCES IN PRESENTING A SINGLE MOTION. VOTE RESULTS BY ROLL CALL OF THE 557 DELS GAVE THE MAJORITY MOTION 68 PCT (350 DELS OUT OF 517 VOTING), "RINNOVAMENTO" 17 PCT (86 DELS), "PRESENZA LIBERALE" 11 PCT (57 DELS) AND THE "ITALIAN LIBERALE-INCONTRO DEMOCRATICO" RIGHT WING FACTION 4.6 PCT (24 DELS). AFTER AN OPEN HEAD COUNT ON THE MOTIONS, THE MORE IMPORTANT BUT SECRET BALLOTING ON LISTS SHOWED DRAMATIC DEFECTIONS FROM THE MAJORITY TO THE RIGHT, AND A PROBABLE CONVERGENCE OF MAJORITY DISSIDENTS (WHO HAD PREVIOUSLY ABSTAINED) IN SUPPORT OF THE LEFT FACTIONS. VOTE RESULT GAVE THE RIGHT WING FACTION 19 PCT (103 DELS) WHILE THE MAJORITY DROPPED 96 VOTES TO A TOTAL OF 46 PCT (254 DELS). THE LEFT FACTIONS EDGED AHEAD TO 20 PCT (112 DELS) FOR "RINNOVAMENTO" AND 15 PCT (80 DELS) FOR "PRESENZA LIBERALE" AND ANNOUNCED THEIR INTENTION TO WORK AS A UNIT IN THE NEW NATIONAL COUNCIL. UNDER THE PARTY STATUTE PROVISIONS FOR DISTRIBUTION OF NATIONAL COUNCIL SEATS, "PRESENZA LIBERALE" (BONEA), AS THE SMALLEST MINORITY, DROPPED FROM 21 TO ONLY 8 SEATS WHILE THE RIGHT WING MADE CORRESPONDING GAINS. THE BONEA FACTION ALSO LOST ALL REPRESENTATION ON THE 21 MAN DIRECTORATE, WHILE THE RIGHT WING REAPPEARED IN THE TOP POLICY ORGAN, AFTER A PROLONGED ABSENCE, WITH 3 SEATS. THE MAJORITY RETAINED ITS 108 NATIONAL COUNCIL AND 14 DIRECTORATE SEATS, WHILE "RINNOVAMENTO" ALSO HELD STEADY WITH 28 COUNCIL AND 4 DIRECTORATE SEATS.

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6. THE CONGRESS RESULTS PROVOKED UNDERSTANDABLE WRATH IN THE BONEA CAMP AND CHARGES THAT THE MAJORITY HAD DELIBERATELY RELEASED "SHARPSHOOTERS" TO DO IN THE LEFT WING. MAJORITY LEADERS HEATEDLY DENY THIS AND PRIVATELY EXPLAIN DEFECTIONS AS AN UNDISCIPLINED ACT OF VENGEANCE BY SOME OF THEIR DELS, MANY OF WHOM ARE PARTY PROVINCIAL SECRETARIES, IN RESPONSE TO LEFT WING HECKLING WITHIN THE PROVINCIAL FEDERATIONS IN RECENT MONTHS. DESPITE A REPORTED INITIAL REACTION BY BONEA IN FAVOR OF WITHDRAWAL FROM THE PARTY, MAJORITY LEADERS ARE CONFIDENT THAT NO SIGNIFICANT DEFECTIONS WILL RESULT AT THIS TIME. "RINNOVAMENTO" FACTION LEADERS ARE ALSO WORKING TO ASSURE THAT THE BONEA GROUP REMAINS WITHIN THE PARTY. HAVING TROUNCED THE OPPOSITION, THE MAJORITY EXPRESS THE INTENTION TO BE MAGNANIMOUS AND POSSIBLY TO OFFER BONEA A SPOT ON THE DIRECTORATE (WHICH WOULD NOT BE DUE HIM UNDER PARTY STATUTES). ALTHOUGH A SPLIT IN THE PARTY NOW APPEARS IMPROBABLE, THE DANGER OF INDIVIDUAL DEFECTIONS EXISTS, PARTICULARLY AMONG YOUNGER PARTY ACTIVISTS. THE TWO LEFT FACTIONS ARE EXPECTED TO CAUCUS IN THE NEAR FUTURE TO EXAMINE THEIR SITUATION.

7. COMMENT: THE CONGRESS LEAVES THE PLI VERY MUCH AS IT WAS, WITH LITTLE HOPE FOR SIGNIFICANT ELECTORAL ADVANCE OR NEAR TERM REINSERTION INTO THE GOVT. IT WOULD PROBABLY BE UNFAIR, HOWEVER, TO PUT ALL OF THE BLAME FOR THIS PREDICAMENT ON THE MALAGODI-BIGNARDI LEADERSHIP. IT IS NOT AT ALL CLEAR THAT, AS THE PARTY LEFT SUGGESTS, THE PLI COULD SUCCESSFULLY SEEK ELECTORAL SPACE TO THE LEFT OF THE DC IN COOPERATION/COMPETITION WITH THE PRI, PSDI AND PSI.
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THAT SPACE IS ALREADY CROWDED. HOWEVER, THE OPPOSITION AND PARTICULARLY DISSIDENTS LIKE BOZZI AND COTTONE SEEM ON FIRM GROUND IN DEMANDING A MORE DYNAMIC PARTY LEADERSHIP AND GREATER EFFORTS TO CREATE A BETTER PUBLIC IMAGE, WHETHER OR NOT THE PARTY TRIES TO EXPAND TO THE LEFT. BOZZI'S SALLY "PLI, KNOCK IF YOU ARE STILL THERE" STUNG BIGNARDI INTO ASSURANCES THAT THE LIBERALS WOULD MAKE THEIR VOICE HEARD MORE EFFECTIVELY ON ISSUES LIKE THE DIVORCE REFERENDUM AND THE RECENTLY PASSED LAW ON THE PUBLIC FINANCING OF POLITICAL PARTIES. BIGNARDI, HOWEVER, FACES A POSSIBLY INSUPERABLE TASK IN ANY ATTEMPT TO UNIFY THE PARTY'S CONSERVATIVE MAJORITY AND THE DISGRUNTLED LEFT MINORITY, AND MOBILIZE IT INTO EFFECTIVE POLITICAL ACTION TO RESCUE THE PARTY FROM THE VERY REAL THREAT OF GRADUAL AND IRREVERSIBLE ECLIPSE. VOLPE

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